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Poteau Mountain

Rustic Road Auto Tour

Ouachita National Forest



Welcome to the Poteau Mountain Rustic Road Auto Tour. Set aside one half day to travel this backwoods ridgeline route, which covers nearly 22 miles of some of the most beautiful forested land in Arkansas. Learn about folks who traveled these mountains before you. Enjoy the breathtaking views and bask in the contemplative solitude that only nature can provide. Pack a picnic lunch and explore one or more of the five stops along the way.

The route travels along Forest Road 158, a dirt road that can be a little rough during extreme weather conditions. Although sedans can usually negotiate the road, trucks or high-clearance vehicles are recommended. All intersections are clearly marked, just follow the auto tour signs.

Obtain a sense of the height of Poteau Mountain above the surrounding countryside from the many scenic overlooks along the way. You may view Stringer Lake, the Fourche Mountain Range, and Round Mountain with its lush forest covered dome. West of Dobbs Spring, travelers can view Lake Hinkle on the far side of Walker Mountain. Now just sit back and enjoy the rustic beauty of Poteau Mountain.



1. River Valley Overlook

(From Waldron, drive north on Highway 71 for 6 miles to Forest Road 158. Turn west and travel 3.1 miles to River Valley Overlook.)

The Poteau River Valley has a long history of providing for the needs of people. Once the hunting grounds of the Osage Indian Tribe, the valley later hosted the villages of the Quapaw and Caddoan Indian tribes. LaSalle's exploration of Arkansas in the 1600's brought French trappers and hunters to take advantage of the abundant wildlife and the trading opportunities with the local tribes.

The name Poteau is believed to have come from a French word meaning trading post. The area may have been named for the posts that the French traders drove into the bank of the Poteau River onto which they would tie their pirogue (a canoe hollowed out of a log).

In the 1800's, the land to the north of Poteau Mountain became more populated. Some settlers moved south into the Poteau River Valley in search of "elbow room". The valley provided grazing for livestock, wood for shelter and warmth, and a year-round water supply. The settlers would eventually displace the Native Americans, who would move farther west into what is now Oklahoma.



2. Lookout Gap

(From the overlook at the first stop, continue west on Forest Road 158 for 2.5 miles.)

Look to the north for the old roadbed that crosses Forest Road 158, the road you are traveling on. The route was first used by Indians as a footpath over the mountain. Later, settlers and traders used it as the major route from Texarkana to Fort Smith. Close your eyes and imagine the sights and sounds from teams of horses straining to pull iron-wheeled wagons up the steep and rocky trail.

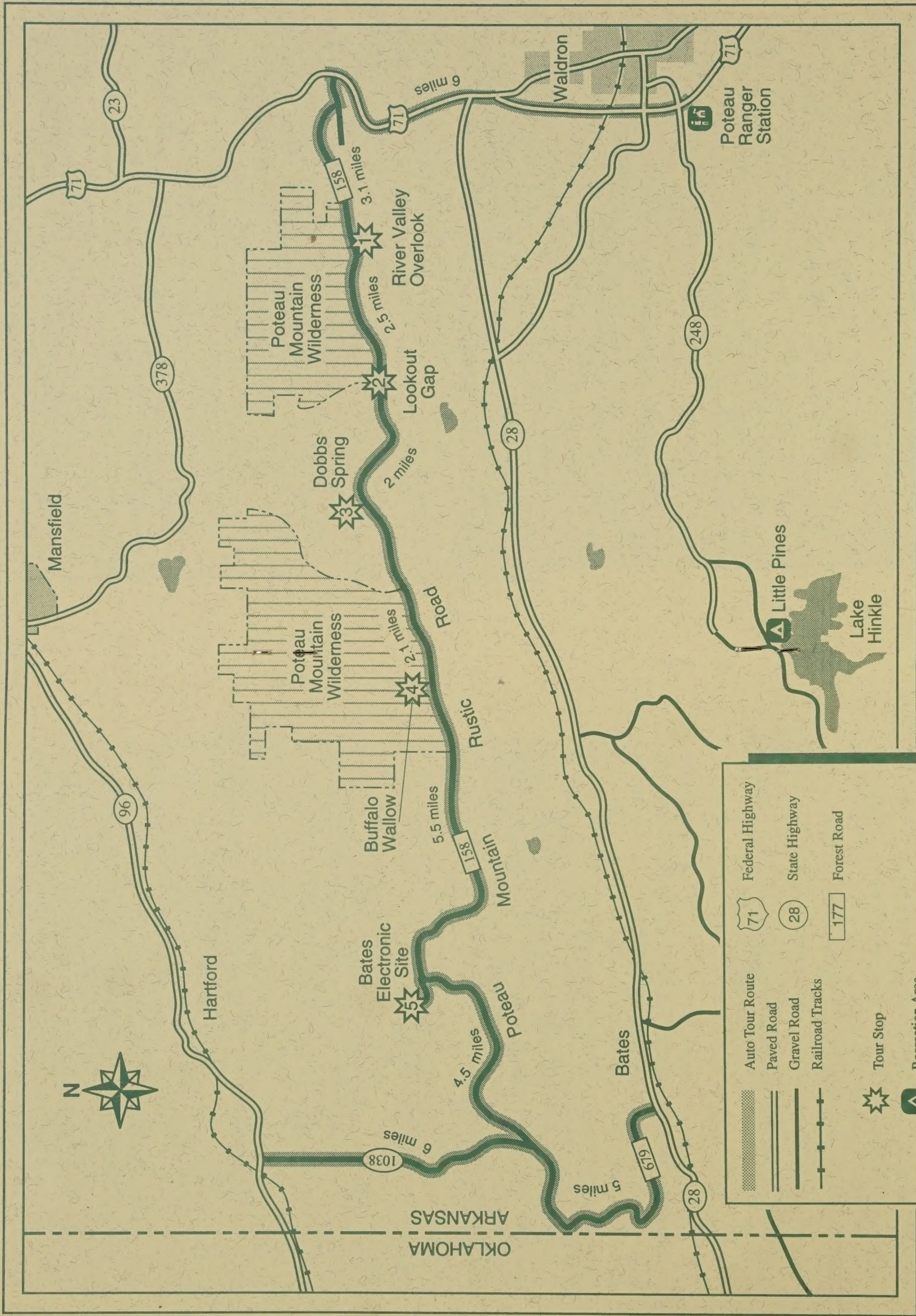
Although the quickest route from Mansfield to Hon, this trail was not necessarily the easiest. Weary travelers may have rested here after making the slow, hard climb. However, they would have to remain alert, for the surrounding landscape provided a perfect setting for ambush. Place yourself in a cramped wagon, tired, thirsty, covered with dust and needing to stretch your legs. However, news of recent shootings makes you hurry on your way. Bank robbers, including the legendary Belle Star, were rumored to have frequently traveled this route over the mountain.



3. Dobbs Spring

(From the previous stop, continue west on Forest Road 158 for 2 miles.)

On the north side of the road, you can find the remains of Dobbs Spring. The rock structure you see may have been built to help pool the water. Travelers probably used the spring as a rest area. Settlers once lived on this mountain and farmed the area, watering crops and orchards from this spring. Why did people settle and farm this mountain top instead of the fertile valleys below? Imagine some of the tales these stones could tell.



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4. Buffalo Wallow

(Continue west from the previous stop on Forest Road 158 for 2.1 miles. Buffalo Wallow will be on the north side of the road.)

This is not a natural location for a pond so why is a pond here? There is no record of how the original pond was formed, but most likely it was built to water range cattle. In the 1950's, the Arkansas Cattlemen's Association funded the enlargement of the pond by the Forest Service. Today, the area is no longer used for livestock grazing. The pond is now a source of water for wildlife. Today, partnerships like the one mentioned above are common on national forest lands. Through these cooperative efforts many facilities are now available to the public. Many groups and individuals are helping build and maintain trails, reconstruct and rehabilitate old buildings, staff the information stations, and help with habitat improvement projects for wildlife.

Civilian Conservation Corps

Poteau Mountain Road was built in the 1930's by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC built this road and many others throughout the national forest so that fire fighters could reach wildfires. The concrete culverts used on this road were made by crews from the Shady Lake CCC camp south of Mena. Other camps constructed the fire tower that once stood at the Bates Electronic Site and many of the camping and picnicking facilities still used on the Ouachita National Forest.

Times were desperate during the depression era. The CCC program was sponsored by the Federal government during a time when many families were facing starvation. Many of the young men who worked at these camps received their first pair of boots and regular meals at camp. Money earned at these camps was often sent home to feed families. The goal of putting a nation back to work was achieved while creating recreation facilities still enjoyed today.

Poteau Mountain Wilderness

Years ago, the challenge in this country was to conquer and tame the wilderness. Today, many of these expanses have disappeared. Recognizing the need to preserve these remaining lands in their natural state, Congress passed the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Poteau Mountain Wilderness Area was set aside in 1984. It is comprised of two areas totalling 10,884 acres and is being protected and managed to preserve natural conditions with little or no human influence. These areas provide opportunities for solitude or primitive recreation for this generation and generations to come.

Some things to remember about your wilderness are: (1) No motorized equipment is allowed. (2) If you pack it in, please pack it out. (3) No permanent structures. (4) Practice "Leave No Trace!" ethics when you visit. For more information on the "Leave No Trace!" ethic, call 1-800-332-4100.



5. Bates Electronic Site (Fire Lookout)

(From the pond at the previous stop, continue west on Forest Road 158 for 5.5 miles. Turn north onto Forest Road 158A. Travel a short distance to the top of the ridge.)

High elevations have always been important landscape features for people, whether it be to spot an approaching war party, to detect a fire, send a message or just a place to sit and get a different perspective. At 2,665 feet, the fire tower location on Poteau Mountain is no exception. In the mid-1900's, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built a 45-foot wooden fire tower on top of this mountain to help in early forest fire detection. With advancements in technology, fire detection has shifted from using lookout towers to using airplanes.

Today, all that is left of the old fire tower is part of its foundation. The site is now occupied by several communication

towers supporting systems for various groups including law enforcement and emergency organizations. Interestingly, one of the towers will soon provide service for cellular telephones in the area. Persons with cellular phones have become the best early-warning detectors of fire and other emergencies in some areas. Fire detection will continue to be a function of Poteau Mountain.



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The Ouachita National Forest is an extraordinary place to visit, and this drive highlights just a few of its many treasures. You have experienced the rolling beauty of the forested mountains, glimpsed into the history of the mountain's pioneers, and marveled at the many vistas. All of this has been brought to you through the combined efforts of the USDA Forest Service and the support of volunteers and partnerships. This land belongs to all the public so while visiting your national forest, please remember to be a good woodsman. **If you pack it in, pack it out.**

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